

*Kanthapura*

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*Kanthapura recounts the rise of a Gandhian nationalist movement in a small South Indian village of the same name. The story is narrated by Achakka, an elder brahmin woman with an encyclopedic knowledge about everyone in her village; she tells the story in the meandering, nonlinear style of a sthala-purana, a traditional “legendary history” of a village, its people, and its gods.*

*Achakka begins her tale by situating Kanthapura in its immediate landscape, the Western Ghats mountain range in southwest India that has recently become a center of the British colonial spice trade. The village’s patron deity is the goddess Kenchamma, who fought a demon on the Kenchamma Hill above Kanthapura ages ago and has protected the villagers ever since. Achakka introduces the village’s numerous residents of all caste. She introduces the educated and well-off brahmins, including the wealthy orphan Dorè, who proclaims to be a Gandhian after attending a term of university in the city, and the much more beloved Moorthy, who refuses to marry into one wealthy family after another. Then she introduces the potters and weavers, who are largely turning to agriculture, and finally the pariahs, who live in decrepit huts at the edge of town. But caste does not always translate to wealth. The loincloth-wearing brahmin Bhatta and the shrewd but honest patel and sudra Rangè Gowda are the village’s two most powerful figures.*

One day, Moorthy finds a linga (small idol depicting the Lord Siva) in Ahakka's backyard and the brahmins begin convening prayers for it; soon thereafter, Moorthy begins collecting money from everyone in the village to have a Harikatha-man named Jayaramachar perform his religious discourse about Mahatma Gandhi's promise to save India from foreign domination. This creates a commotion, especially as Moorthy begins to convert other villagers to Gandhi's cause and a Muslim policeman named Badè Khan moves into town. Patel Rangè Gowda will not give Khan a place to stay, so he goes to the nearby Skeffington Coffee Estate, where the presiding Sahib offers him a hut among the workers. Meanwhile, Moorthy convinces various villagers to start spinning their own wool and weaving their own khadi cloth, since Gandhi believes that foreign goods impoverish India and sees weaving as a form of spiritual practice.

But Bhatta despises Gandhism, for his business runs on high-interest loans to small farmers who sell their rice to city-people. He decries the modernization of India and the erosion of the caste system, so he proposes establishing a brahmin party to fight Moorthy's spreading Gandhism and wins the support of many villagers, most notably the rambling Waterfall Venkamma, the priest Temple Rangappa and his wife Lakshamma, Moorthy's own mother Narsamma, and his own wife Chinnamma. Moorthy, who has a vision of Gandhi giving a discourse and decides to dedicate his life to the Mahatma's work, wins over the wealthy widow Rangamma, at whose large house he stockpiles spinning-wheels and books about nonviolent resistance. The powerful Swami in Mysore promises to excommunicate anyone who "pollutes" the traditional system by interacting with people from different castes, and when Narsamma finds out that her son Moorthy will likely be first, she is distraught and refuses to associate with him. But he does not budge and, when the Swami excommunicates his entire family after Moorthy is seen carrying a corpse, Narsamma dies on the banks of the nearby River Himavathy and Moorthy moves into Rangamma's house.

The narrative cuts to the Skeffington Estate, where the maistri convinces coolie workers from impoverished villages around India to come do backbreaking work in horrible conditions at the estate. Their wages are low and the Sahib finds every available means to keep them indentured at the Estate for life, from beating them to raising the prices on daily goods to stealing their wages to, most insidiously, encouraging them to spend their money drinking at the nearby toddy stand. Nobody has managed to leave for ten years, even as a new Sahib has taken over who is kinder than the first (except to the women, Achakka notes, whom he systematically raped until he became embroiled in a legal battle for murdering a father who refused to give up his daughter). But Moorthy's Gandhians, with the help of the brahmin clerk Vasudev, begin teaching the coolies to read and write and recruiting them to join the protest movement. Badè Khan breaks up one of these lessons, which only strengthens Moorthy's resolve, and soon a coolie named Rachanna moves off the estate and into Kanthapura. During the commotion some of the coolie women grabbed the Khan's beard, and Moorthy takes personal responsibility for this attack, which runs counter to the Mahatma's doctrine of nonviolence. He fasts for three days, meditating continuously in the village temple and receiving visions of Siva and Hari as Rangamma, the wise elder brahmin Ramakrishnayya, and the widowed pariah girl Ratna care for him. He grows stronger, responding to threats from Waterfall Venkamma and Bhatta with love and resolving to launch what he calls the "don't-touch-the-Government campaign."

Moorthy approaches Patel Rangè Gowda with his plan, and the powerful town representative and landowner quickly resolves to follow the Mahatma. Together, they convene a Village Congress, which promises to serve as a local branch of Gandhi's Congress of All India. Moorthy visits the house of the former coolie Rachanna, who is now living as a pariah in the village, but finds himself anxious at the thought of going inside or drinking the milk. Rachanna's wife Rachi offers him, since he grew up as a brahmin and has never actually been so close to a pariah. He does so nonetheless and soon convinces a congregation of confused pariah women to spin cloth and join the movement. But when he returns home, Rangamma makes him enter through the back and drink Ganges water to purify himself.

Bhatta soon realizes that he can lead Venkamma to "set fire where we want" if he can find her daughter a husband, so he arranges a marriage with his favorite lawyer, the middle-aged widow Advocate Seenappa. Shortly thereafter, during the holy festival of Kartik, the police come to Rangamma's house and arrest Moorthy. Rachanna cries out, "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!" (or, "Glory to Mahatma Gandhi!"), a battle cry that the Gandhians employ when the police attack them through the rest of the book. The police begin beating and arresting the rest of the villagers, taking 17 in total and releasing all but Moorthy.

*In jail, Moorthy refuses the help of lawyers and spiritual leaders until Advocate Sankar, the Congress Committee Secretary in nearby Karwar city, tells him that the national movement needs him released. Moorthy falls at Sankar's feet and the lawyer holds an enormous meeting for his benefit, although a nameless old man (whom the Swami has paid off) speaks in defense of the British government and the "Beloved Sovereign" Queen Victoria. The Police Inspector comes to the meeting and arrests another of its leaders, Advocate Rangamma, and news spreads fast in Kanthapura by means of a newspaper Rangamma has begun to publish. The villagers read it voraciously, with even the illiterate insisting that others read it to them, and they debate when and whether Moorthy will be released.*

*Rangamma and the Gandhian Nanjamma go to Karwar to visit Advocate Sankar, who is notorious for being an honest and socially-conscious man. Rangamma decides to stay for awhile, and meanwhile the colonial government fires Rangè Gowda, installing another patel for the village in his place. Moorthy is sentenced to three months' imprisonment, and the wise elder Ramakrishnayya dies after stumbling into a pillar during heavy rains the following day. During his cremation, the Himavathy River overflows and swallows his ashes.*

*The villagers decide that the widowed girl Ratna should replace Ramakrishnayya to lead the village's readings from Hindu scriptures, and after Rangamma's return she begins to interpret the texts Ratna reads as calls for the end of British rule in India. The women resolve to form their own Volunteer group, and Rangamma begins to lead them in group meditation and drills to practice nonviolent resistance to beatings from the police. On an auspicious day soon thereafter, the villagers perform a ceremony honoring the Goddess Kenchamma before planting their fields, and Venkamma decides to move her daughter's wedding to the same day as Moorthy's homecoming from prison so that villagers will be forced to choose their allegiance. On the day he is supposed to arrive, the villagers wait to receive him but he does not come, until they realize that the police have secretly escorted him back into Rangamma's house and go there to greet him, shouting Gandhian slogans and nearly starting another clash with the police.*

Moorthy again takes the helm of the village's Gandhian movement, reminding the others about their obligation to speak Truth, reject caste hierarchy, and spin wool each morning. The villagers follow the news of Gandhi's protest of the British salt tax, in which he marches to the sea and makes his own salt, and they bathe in the holy Himavathy River at the precise moment Gandhi reaches the ocean and the police start arresting his followers en masse. Moorthy and Rangamma continue to lead the others in practice drills, waiting for orders from the national Gandhian Congress, but soon discover that the Mahatma has been arrested and decide to officially launch the "don't-touch-the-Government campaign" by protesting toddy stands, refusing to pay taxes or abide by the colonial government's orders, and setting up a "parallel government" for their village that keeps Rangè Gowda as Patel.

Two days later, 139 Kanthapura villagers march to the toddy grove near the Skeffington Coffee Estate and Moorthy refuses to honor the Police Inspector's orders to back down. The Gandhians climb into the grove and begin tearing branches off the trees as the police beat them down with lathis and arrest three villagers: the pariah Rachanna and the potters Lingayya and Siddayya. They corral the rest of the protestors into trucks, which drive them off in different directions and drop them by the side of the road in various parts of the Western Ghats. The protestors march back toward Kanthapura, encountering cart-men who support Gandhi's movement and offer to take them home for free as well as people in the nearby village of Santhapura who decide to join their Satyagraha movement.



The next week, the villagers repeat their protest, encountering various people from the region who proclaim their oppression under British rule and ask Moorthy to help them. When they reach the toddy grove, the Police Inspector marches the coolies off the Skeffington Estate to Boranna's toddy stand, but the Gandhians convince the coolies to join the protest instead of drinking. The police are more violent this time, and they seriously injure Rangamma, Ratna, and Moorthy before dumping the rest on the side of the road, as before. But when they return to Kanthapura, the Gandhians discover that many of the coolies and Gandhi sympathizers from the region have decided to join them, and their movement continues to grow as they launch various other protests, get 24 toddy stands in the area to shut down, and closely follow the accelerating national protest movement.

Besides the few brahmins who still oppose the Gandhi movement, the villagers refuse to cooperate with the government, which infuriates the police and leads them to more and more aggressive tactics. The police barricade every exit out of town, secretly arrest numerous protestors (including the movement's two main leaders, Moorthy and Rangamma) in the middle of the night, and begin assaulting female villagers. One officer nearly rapes Ratna, but Achakka and some of the other women Volunteers find her just in time and decide that she will be the new leader of the protest movement. This group of women, whose perspective the narrative follows closely from this point onward, hide out in the temple and watch Bhatta's house burn down. But a policeman sees them and locks them inside overnight, until the pariah Rachi lets them out.

Three days later, the villagers undertake their fourth and most consequential protest against the police. Rich Europeans come to Kanthapura as the government begins auctioning off the villagers' land, and they bring coolies from the city to begin working the fields. Gandhians from around the region, including Advocate Sankar, flood into the town to help the protest effort. Achakka and the other women begin questioning their loyalty to Gandhi, wondering whether nonviolent resistance will truly save their livelihoods, but soon the march is underway and the police are more vicious than ever before. One of the protestors raises the Gandhian revolutionary flag and the police begin firing against the protestors, massacring them even as they proclaim their commitment to nonviolence. The women hide out in sugarcane fields as they watch their neighbors and party-members get slaughtered, and as they begin to flee Kanthapura, Rachi decides to burn the village down.

Rachi makes a bonfire and sets the village alight before all the women continue marching as far as they can from Kanthapura, across the mountains and into the jungle, where people honor them as "pilgrims of the Mahatma" and offer them a new home in the village of Kashipura. In the year since Kanthapura's destruction, Achakka explains, the villagers have scattered and moved on with their lives, and Moorthy has been released from prison, although he gave up on Gandhi, who started to compromise with the British, and decided to join Jawaharlal Nehru's movement for the equal distribution of wealth. Rangamma is still in jail, and the only person who has returned to Kanthapura is Rangè Gowda, who tells Achakka that the village has been sold away to city-people from Bombay.